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ABSTRACT

This digest highlights the planning phase of developing and implementing middle school foreign language programs, focusing particular attention on program types and criteria for selecting an appropriate program. Specific issues addressed include the following: (1) Which language or languages should be taught? (2) At what grade level should foreign language instruction begin? (3) Should the foreign language courses be required or elective, and, if elective, should only certain students be enrolled? (4) What is the optimal frequency and allocated time for a foreign language course? (5) Which type of foreign language program should be offered? and (6) How can program articulation be established and maintained? (VWL)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics
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ERIC Digest

Planning Middle School Foreign Language Programs

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There are many issues to consider when developing and implementing a middle school foreign language program. This *Digest* will focus on the planning phase by providing a review of program types and criteria for selecting an appropriate program.

In recent years, there has been renewed concern about the philosophy, objectives, and curricular content of the nation's middle-level education (Alexander, & McEwin, 1989). Recent reports have acknowledged foreign languages as an important part of the middle school curriculum, when appropriately designed for adolescents. (See Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Maryland Task Force on the Middle Learning Years, 1989; and Southern Governors' Association, 1986). These reports have influenced educational policymakers at federal, state, and local levels. Congress has allocated more funds to foreign language programs; state boards of education have augmented or instituted foreign language requirements for high school diplomas; school districts have implemented greater numbers of foreign language programs at the middle and elementary levels; and more colleges and universities are reinstating or increasing their foreign language requirements for admission (Draper, 1989).

Middle school foreign language programs must complement the courses and curricula available in their districts' elementary and high schools. Though a district may choose from several program models, administrators must realize that successful middle school foreign language programs are tailored to meet the special needs of the students. An exploratory course cannot be taught in the middle school in the same manner that it is taught in an elementary school. Similarly, a sequential middle school course cannot follow the same methodology as that of a high school. A curricular focus and a set of instructional strategies appropriate to middle-level foreign language programs are necessary. Several program models are described below.

Program Models

Foreign Language Exploratory Programs (FLEX) (also called *Foreign Language Experience, Appreciation, or Awareness*) are for students with no previous exposure to foreign language study. They seek to introduce students to foreign languages and cultures rather than to develop language skills. The objectives of most contemporary FLEX programs include the following: to provide an introduction to several languages and cultures; to teach awareness and appreciation of other cultures; to develop an appreciation of the value of communicating in another language; to increase awareness and understanding of English and general language elements; and to motivate students to continue language study (see Curtin & Pesola, 1988; Kennedy & DeLorenzo, 1985).

Exploratory programs have several forms. **General language** courses, conducted in English, teach about language, and may include a discussion of signed languages and computer languages. **Language potpourri** offers a limited introduction to two or more languages (that may be available for later sequential study) and their cultures. **Introductory language courses** focus on culture and beginning language learning.

Exploratory courses are typically offered in the first year of middle school, followed by sequential courses in subsequent years. A language potpourri course is often team taught by specialists in each language. Some exploratory courses last 9 to 18 weeks, but a full year of study is preferred. It is recommended that classes meet daily, so students do not lose motivation and interest.

Sequential Programs seek to provide a logical and progressive study of a language, stressing each of the four skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—and the development of cultural knowledge. Some sequential programs focus on content, with subjects such as social studies, mathematics, science, and/or art, music, and physical education being taught in the foreign language. Students are expected to achieve a certain degree of proficiency in a foreign language by the end of a multi-year sequential program.

Whether the course content of Level 1 extends over one or two middle school years, it is highly recommended that classes meet daily for a full period so enrichment activities appropriate for middle school students can be incorporated into the curriculum.

Continuation Programs are designed for students who have studied a foreign language in elementary school (FLES). FLES students acquire a certain degree of listening and speaking proficiency (depending on the type of program and number of instructional hours) and a limited number of reading and writing skills (Pesola & Curtin, 1989). FLES students entering middle school need a different foreign language course than do students who have never been exposed to a foreign language.

Students from elementary school *immersion* programs who spent 50% to 100% of class time learning subject matter taught in the foreign language have acquired significant proficiency in all four language skills. These students require a specially designed middle school program if they are to continue to develop their foreign language skills. It is suggested that at least two periods of daily foreign language instruction be provided: one, a foreign language arts class; the other, a content course, such as social studies.

One practical option that districts use to serve the needs of continuing language learners and to work within personnel and budget constraints is to select one specific middle school to offer the continuation courses. Other middle schools in the district then offer the exploratory or beginning level language courses.

The design and implementation of continuing middle school foreign language programs can be facilitated through horizontal articulation at the elementary level: language instruction that is offered in more than one school in a district must be as uniform as possible and based on a common curriculum. All teachers should address the same objectives at each course level and utilize similar instructional strategies and materials. When elementary programs are relatively uniform, middle and high school programs can better serve their incoming students respectively.

Criteria for Selecting an Appropriate Program

Which language or languages should be taught? The reasons for learning languages include economic, political, social, and individual reasons. Each of these should be considered when deciding which language(s) to offer. (For a fuller discussion, see Met, 1989.) Other factors to consider include: Which languages are taught at the elementary and high school levels? What is most practical for developing language proficiency over several years of study? For which language(s) can certified teachers, preferably with middle school experience, be found? What human and material resources are locally available for the foundation and support of the program?

At what grade level should foreign language instruction begin? Most research indicates "the sooner, the better." Students who begin language study in the elementary or middle school and have the opportunity to continue study of the same language for several years should be able to develop practical proficiency in that language. Otherwise, language study for two to three years in high school leads only to limited proficiency.

Should the foreign language course(s) be required or elective? If elective, should only certain students be enrolled? Many states and local school districts are adding (or reinstating) foreign language requirements at various grade levels. Currently, Louisiana requires foreign language study of all academically able 4th through 8th graders; New York requires 2 years of study before completion of 9th grade; and North Carolina is implementing its mandate for all elementary school students to study a foreign language every year from K-5 (Draper, 1989).

All students can benefit from the study of a foreign language. Research indicates that intelligence plays only a minor role in predicting foreign language achievement (Genesee, 1976). Foreign language courses should be open to all students and should not be reserved for above average or gifted and talented students. (For information on expanding foreign language to low achievers and the handicapped, see Andrade, et al., 1989.)

What is the optimal frequency and allocated time for a foreign language course? The optimal frequency is a full period of foreign language instruction daily throughout the year for sequential programs. This is also preferred for exploratory programs, regardless of their length in weeks. If the goal of sequential foreign language programs is to have students attain a certain level of language proficiency, then the maximum number of contact hours possible must be offered (Müller, 1989).

Which type of foreign language program should be offered? In order to select an appropriate program model, school districts must consider the desired goals and outcomes of the program. These outcomes could range from simply exposing students to foreign languages in an effort to motivate interest in further language study (e.g., exploratory programs) to offering a program aimed at functional language proficiency (e.g., sequential programs). Some districts experimenting with interdisciplinary team teaching include foreign language programs as part of their global education objective. Decisions also need to reflect budget, staffing, and other practical considerations.

Establishing and Maintaining Program Articulation

Administrators and teachers from all levels must collaborate to develop a coherent, articulated program that recognizes the previous learning of the students and enables that learning to become a foundation for continued foreign language development. This cooperation can be established and maintained through joint workshops for middle school and high school teachers; joint curriculum planning activities; sharing of data about students from level to level; and sharing program information with elementary or high schools (Alexander & McEwin, 1989). (See Nerenz, 1990, for enhancing middle level programs and articulating with elementary/high school courses.)

Concrete Steps To Take in Planning the Implementation or Expansion of a Foreign Language Program

Tegarden and Brown (1989) suggest the following: 1) Define a rationale for implementation or expansion; 2) Conduct a parental interest survey and study the results; 3) Review research on the positive effects of early language learning; 4) Decide on the grade level at which to begin and provide justification for this decision; 5) Devise a plan for curriculum development; 6) Identify resources for locating qualified teachers; 7) Develop a plan for modifying the existing program, if necessary; 8) Develop a plan for program coordination and articulation; 9) Develop a plan for teacher supervision and evaluation; 10) Develop a plan for ongoing program evaluation (who, what, how); 11) Draw up an estimated budget (at least in the first three years); and 12) Establish a time table for implementation.

Additional information on planning middle school foreign language programs can be found in *A Planning and Resource Guide for Foreign Languages in Maryland Middle Schools*, available in 1991 from the Maryland State Department of Education.

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